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Recommended Repository Citation

Jeffrey, Jonathan J.. (2010). Looking Back: Growing Pains for the Bowling Green Public Library, 1950-1961. *Kentucky Libraries*, 74 (3), 22-25.

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Looking Back: Growing Pains for the Bowling Green Public Library, 1950-1961
by Jonathan Jeffrey

In 1950 the Bowling Green Public Library celebrated its twelfth anniversary. First started in the public “rest room” of the downtown Helm Hotel, the library had been housed in a commercial building, the local armory (which burned in 1946 destroying the library’s 10,000 volumes), and eventually a converted residence. As the new decade dawned, the library had a collection of approximately 12,000 volumes housed chiefly in surplus army ammunition crates, and it boasted a monthly circulation of 2,200. It was clear by 1950 that Bowling Green was hungry for more library services, but its facilities did not allow for much expansion of collections or services.¹

In 1953, after years of persuasive and sustained community support, the library was officially recognized by the Bowling Green city government. An ordinance passed by the City Council on October 2, 1953 recognized “a free public library...to be known as the Bowling Green City Library.” The Council’s action in establishing a free public library placed the responsibility of maintaining the institution on the city’s taxpayers under the auspices of a Library Board of Trustees.²

Although guaranteed a source of funding, the library changed little because of the new ordinance. No plans existed for a new building, and the “colored” branch remained on State Street. The library did utilize some city services such as lawn services offered by the Board of Public Works. Since the county was not sharing the library’s operating costs, a fee for county users was

consistently on the Board's agenda, but no action was taken until 1960 on that issue.

The other matter consistently on the Board's agenda was a new building. The house hosting the library at 1014 Chestnut Street had not been built for such purposes, and it was absolutely crammed with books and other materials. In 1951, the library trustees approached a local philanthropist about a proposed library to honor his wife, but this effort was met with benign reticence. In November 1951, the Board asked all area real estate agents to "be on the lookout for a desirable location" where a new library could be located. However, when the Trustee chairwoman, Jane Morningstar approached the city government about the feasibility of a new building, she was told that the city was in a "desperate financial situation." The Board felt that cooperating with the city during the crisis would strengthen the relationship between the City Council and the Library Board.

By 1953 the city's financial condition had improved, and the library was teeming with materials. The local paper presented the situation:

There are more books at the library than there are shelves on which they can be properly displayed, but this has not prevented the library staff from pushing forward with its program to add books whenever possible, and when necessary, stack them in piles on the floor or on tables in order that they might be seen and used. ("Library" 4)

The “colored” branch, had room for growth, although the facility was in shambles. When Lottie Bell Crabtree became the “colored” branch librarian in November 1952, gas was finally installed in the building. This required the Library Board to purchase two new gas heaters, and the owner raised the rent \$10 a month. When Crabtree resigned in 1956, the Board decided to close the “colored” branch in light of recent events in the civil rights movement.

In late-1953, city government agreed to allow the Board of Trustees to investigate financing avenues for the construction of a new library. City real estate agents were contacted again to be on the “look-out” for a potential site. In early 1954 the Board considered a list of sites that were for sale, and in March they agreed to purchase the old Turpin home at 1225 State Street. In the following months, methods of financing were discussed, and the Trustees decided that a committee should be appointed independent of the Library Board.

Learning that the Board was searching for a suitable site for a new library, the Presbyterian Church offered to sell the old Westminster church at the corner of State and 12th Streets to the city. Two years earlier, the Westminster church had voted to merge with the Presbyterian Church, leaving the Westminster building to be used as an annex. The beautiful Romanesque church with Ionic columns, arched windows and dome was centrally located and boasted adequate space for work rooms, meeting areas and a reading room. In July

1954, a committee from the Presbyterian Church offered the building to the city for \$75,000.

By this time, a holding company had been chartered to “cooperate with the city and library board in financing and ultimate acquisition by the city and/or the library board of a Public Library Building.” The company was appropriately titled the Bowling Green Public Library Corporation (BGPLC). (Charter 1) Officers were quickly elected, and a bond was issued for \$100,000 on January 1, 1956, which would make possible a library building costing \$65,000.³ The remainder of the money was to be used in acquiring land, furnishing the building and offsetting other expenses incidental to the construction program. The Board would then rent the building from the holding company at a rental large enough to amortize the bond issue over a period of years. (“Library to be Built” 1)

Not wanting to completely dismiss the possibility of utilizing the Westminster Building, the Board asked Robert S. Alvarez, the Director of the Nashville Public Library, to consult on the building project. He strongly recommended against remodeling the Westminster Building. In a letter to the Board, he advised:

I feel sure that you could not purchase this property (Westminster Building) and fix it up suitably with the money you have in hand, and even if you had twice as much money I would not advise trying to make a library out of this building. Unless you tore down the outside walls and completely

remodeled the place, it would still look old and forbidding on the outside and not too attractive or usable on the inside.

The adaptive reuse of buildings had not yet come into vogue. Mr. Alvarez encouraged the erection of a new library, although he was critical of the city's lack of vision. He wrote: "While your building for \$65,000 will not be equal of many that are being built in cities the size of Bowling Green, I believe it can be made ample for your present state of library development." The Board heeded Alvarez's advice and proceeded with the new building plans. ("Westminster" 6)

In December 1954 the Turpin lot at 1225 State Street was finally purchased for \$12,000. By this time, the Board had chosen an architect, H. Clinton Parrent of Nashville, on the recommendation of Alvarez. In March 1955, Lillian Warrenner was named head librarian. Almost immediately, she was asked to prepare an outline of operational space for a new library. The Board, with few changes, submitted this plan at a joint meeting of the Board and the BGPLC on May 4, 1995. This slightly altered plan was submitted to the architect, who was told to design a "no frills" building for \$65,000.

Parrent submitted several plans to the Board and BGPLC in September 1955. They selected a one-story building, with a shallow portico supported by boxed columns. The seven-bay front elevation had two large windows on either side of the double doors and a large transom widow. On either side of the portico were smaller windows highlighted with green shutters. The plan was attractive and inexpensive. The new library would house 20,000 volumes and

contain a reading room capable of seating 40, a work room, conference room and office space. The architect preferred that the building be entirely of masonry construction, but it was less expensive to have the portico and all sills done in wood. When the bids were opened on October 6, 1955, the lowest bidder, Arch Lucas and Son of Smiths Grove, was awarded the contract. The old Turpin residence was razed in August 1955 to make way for the new library.

On January 5, 1956 a ground breaking ceremony was held for the library. Mayor C.W. Lampkin broke ground with the ceremonial shovel. Members of the Library Board and the BGPLC looked on with satisfaction as a dream became reality. When the new library was completed in late November 1956, a massive move from the old building on Chestnut Street took place. The collection contained approximately 15,000 volumes. Temporary personnel was hired to facilitate the move. With additional volunteer help, the entire collection was moved in less than two full working days. Everything was readied for the opening on Friday, November 23, 1956, the day after Thanksgiving. The building had new furnishings and steel shelving, so only the library collection and some office furniture had to be moved. Shortly after the move, the local paper reported that "another plank in its platform for civic improvement has been achieved and herewith drops 'an adequate library' from it (the newspaper's) list of community needs." ("Community" 4) Indeed, the library had come a long way from those ammunition crate shelves.

By March 1958 the library boasted 17,000 volumes and a monthly circulation of over 2,500 books. Approximately 3,600 borrowers were registered with the library. A children's room and a Kentucky collection were special features. The library subscribed to 20 magazines and two newspapers. In addition, the conference room was heavily used by community groups.

By 1959 the Board was cognizant that the library had already outgrown its new facility. At the April 15, 1959 board meeting, Mrs. Warrenner reported that space must be made in the near future for more books. After a general discussion, the Board decided to approach the BGPLC about using the \$10,000 remaining from the original bond money to enclose the carport used for the bookmobile. When the building was designed in 1955, this area had three walls, so it could be easily enclosed. For minimal construction costs, the library's stack area could be doubled. In March 1960 the Board sent a resolution to the BGPLC stating the need for an addition. Due to rapid growth, the Board urged the BGPLC to use the available \$10,000 to enclose the 840 square foot carport. The resolution stated that "all available shelving space is being used or will be in use within a very short period of time." ("Resolution" 1) The BGPLC concurred, and O.L. Harwood was selected as the contractor. Also included in this project was a new circulation desk. The new addition, completed in late 1960 housed additional steel shelving, the library's vertical files, a map case, a storage area for serials, and its own heating/cooling system. In 1954 the Board had believed

that it would not be necessary to enclose this area for ten years; it had to be done after only five years.

In 1954 the county made its first appropriation of \$900 for bookmobile services in Warren County; the state added an additional \$300. The bookmobile made its initial run on January 15, 1955 with Mrs. C.H. Clark as librarian/driver. Students at Western's Trade School installed shelves in the vehicle which had been given to the county by the Friends of Kentucky Libraries the previous year. Approximately 60% of the books were for children and youth, with the remainder selected for adult readers. To oversee the vehicle's operation and its book collection, the County Judge appointed a bookmobile advisory committee. The bookmobile was particularly effective at rural schools which had either poor or no library services.

In 1961, after six years of no funding increases, the county's bookmobile program was in dire straits. The \$900 annual appropriation was inadequate to keep the bookmobile in operation. The state subsidized the program and provided most of the books. Margaret Willis, Director of the Kentucky Library Extension Service, said, "Your (Warren) County is wealthy, but is practically the poorest supporter of the bookmobile in comparison to its ability to support such a program." (Willis 4) Considering the situation, Ms Willis contacted County Judge John M. Milliken and vowed that state funds would be withheld, unless the county appropriated a minimum of \$1,400 for fiscal year 1960-61.

Prodded by Ms. Willis and library supporters, the Fiscal Court approved a \$500 increase in the appropriation, the minimum requested by Ms. Willis. In comparison, nearby Allen County with a considerably smaller population appropriated \$2,500 for their bookmobile program the same year; adjacent Butler County received \$2,000 annually from that county's Fiscal Court. Judge Milliken claimed that the settlement of an old lawsuit allowed the Fiscal Court to raise the appropriation. However, there was no guarantee that an old lawsuit could be settled every year to continue the raised appropriation. When Warren County's bookmobile program was initiated in 1954, the county government had planned to assume full responsibility for its support within three years. This never happened.

In mid-1960 the Library Board settled temporarily the long-standing problem of free county use of the library. The library was supported by city funds, and the Board had grappled with the issue of charging county patrons since 1950. On June 20, 1960 the Board's chairwoman Jane Morningstar, on behalf of the Board, sent a letter to Judge Milliken stating that the Bowling Green Public Library would terminate free service to county residents beginning July 1, 1960. An annual fee of \$5 per family would be charged to all county users. The Board regretted this action, but "it has been taken because the library is financed by city funds and its constant growth made continuance of past policy of free service to residents of the county impossible." (Morningstar to Milliken, 1960)

Perhaps the Board felt county residents would pressure the Fiscal Court to make a token appropriation for library services. If this was the intention, it didn't work.

In July 1961 Lillian Warrener resigned as head librarian due to her husband's prolonged illness. She had served in the position longer than any of her predecessors and had created a degree of stability for her successor. She had overseen the construction of the new facility, supervised the move, campaigned for the enclosure of the carport for additional space, as well as built the collection from 14,000 volumes in 1954 to 25,000 in 1961. The static, first decade of library services in the city was followed by a decade of growth and relative stability, creating an encouraging environment for the future despite its tenuous financial situation.

Notes

- 1 For more information about the first twelve years of the history of the Bowling Green Public Library see: Jeffrey, Jonathan. "Looking Back: The Genesis of the Bowling Green Public Library," *Kentucky Libraries* 68(Spring 2004): 33-40.
- 2 The first members of the Bowling Green Public Library Board of Trustees were: Margie Helm, Max B. Harlin, Jane Morningstar, chairwoman, Louise Taylor, and Dorothy Briggs, secretary-treasurer.
- 3 The officers of the Bowling Green Public Library Corporation were: County Judge G. D. Milliken, R.D. Graham, chairman of the Board of Public Works, R.D. Willcock, president of Citizens National Bank, Jones E. Mercer, president of Potter-Matlock Bank and Trust Company, and Max B. Harlin, local attorney; Harlin was elected chairman.

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